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OUR FAMILY'S STORY

by Malka Muz Singel and Liza Muz Berg

We 2 sisters, Malka and Liza, wish to tell the story of our family. There had been 11 adults, 9 children and their families, and their names were: Fayge-Udel Muz our mother; our eldest sister Rivka and her husband Shimon Blaustein, their children Sussl, Chaya, Brunia and Melech; our sister Sarah Biderman and her children Yehoshua, Shlomo and Chaya; our sister Chaya-Rochel, her husband Berel and their children Pessl, Yukl and Shmuel; our brother Berel Muz, his wife Leah and their children Yehoshua, Hershele and Rivka.

Before World War I, Manyevitz had been a railway station ("stanzia") named after the village Manyevitz, 3-4 kilometers away. It was built on the new line connecting Kiev and Warsaw. With the exception of the few Jews who were given permits to live there, mostly dealers in lumber and their workers, Jews were not allowed. Among the few were our father, Zvi-Hershel Muz and his partner, Velvel Kushnir, who were given a permit to own and operate a food-supply storehouse for the workers who lived there.

We and all our siblings were born in Lishnivka. Our mother kept a store there, but it was ransacked by the Cossacks when World War I broke out. When the Austrians took over the area from the Russians, all the Jews were ordered to leave their homes and go to live in central Poland near the city Zamushtz. Life was most difficult. When we were allowed to return in 1917, we found our home in ruins. Our parents and many other refugees decided to settle in Manyevitz where prospects were relatively good. The new community grew, synagogues were built as were cheders for the children's education. But riots and pogroms continued to be common occurrences what with the Bolsheviks and the gangs of Ukrainian thugs who pillaged and murdered Jews. Only in 1921, when our area was annexed to the Polish Republic, was there order and peace.

The town continued to grow and develop with the influx of Jews from the neighboring villages, from towns and cities in the District of Wolyn, from Polesia and from different places in Poland. Spirited political movements and parties were formed, and, since the town was situated in and near the forests, camps were established to train pioneers for their aliya to Eretz Yisrael. These kibbutzim were active on and off until the outbreak of World War II.

The pine forests and dry air were beneficial for those suffering from tuberculosis and asthma, and the town became a summer resort that drew Jews from the entire area.

In 1935, ill winds predicting evil began to blow our way from Germany. In 1938, our brother Shmuel (Mille) emigrated to Argentina, and we wanted to follow him – but there was not enough time.

When war broke out between Poland and Germany, our area was "liberated" by the Red Army. We lived in fear as our family was slated to be sent to Siberia for the crime of being wealthy merchants.

In the meantime, many refugees who were fleeing Germany streamed into our area from western Poland. Their situation was not good, but at least with us they were secure and not hungry.

Our lives went on thus for 2 years.

The situation worsened with the outbreak of war between Germany and Russia. On the very first day, our town was bombed (with Jewish casualties), and when the Red Army retreated, the town was left with no governing authority. Thousands of farmers from all the surrounding villages descended upon the town, pillaged and looted whatever they could get their hands on, all the while beating and murdering Jews.

When the Germans took over after a few days, a Ukrainian police force was set up which faithfully carried out all the Germans' orders. Jews were taken out to slave labor, with every step accompanied by beatings. At first, we were commanded to put blue and white ribbons on our sleeves, but this was later changed to yellow patches which were to be worn on our chests and backs. All contact with non-Jews was forbidden as was the purchase or the exchange of valuables for a bit of food.

Malka Writes:

THE FIRST AKTZIA

One morning a number of trucks rolled into town, and the Germans began to capture men, ostensibly for work. They were beaten so mercilessly that 6 men died. The others were taken out of town to prepared pits. There, groups of 25 were lowered into the pits and shot, layer upon layer. There, 375 Jews were murdered.

Among those that did the catching were young local gentiles, actually children, who hunted out those that were hiding. For every Jew they found they were rewarded with soup. The Ukrainians danced in the street of the synagogue, and the murderers celebrated by getting drunk.

Of our relatives, 15 were lost, but my husband had managed to hide. Our little daughter was not told that her father was alive for fear that she might reveal this to her gentile friends.

The following year was one of utter terror. The few remaining men and women were taken out to work in the sawmill. However hungry, beaten and despondent we were, many had hopes of surviving by hiding or escaping to the forests. And we had heard rumors that groups of Ukrainian communists were organizing in the forest to fight the Germans.

My husband and I, our little daughter and a few others, 9 people altogether, managed to reach the home of a farmer we knew. My sisters Breindl, Liza and Esther, together with a number of others, fled to a different forest. Only our mother, of blessed memory, refused to join us, saying that not everyone could be saved. She bitterly mourned our relatives who had been killed the year

before (September, 1941). Our father had died at the outbreak of the Polish-German war and many in our town envied him his death.

Immediately after our escape, our town was completely sealed off. Ukrainian guards were posted everywhere to ensure that no one could escape. On Friday, Elul 23, September, 1942, Jews from both sides of the town were concentrated into one place, and the next day, on Shabbat, they were herded under heavy German guard, together with the Ukrainian police and volunteers – Ukrainians and Poles – to the "Ferdishe Mogiles," the Horses Graves, where the men had been murdered the previous year. We heard the shots and knew that with each bullet the wick of yet another Jewish life was snuffed out. Thus were murdered over 2,000 Jews.

In the forest, we tried to organize ourselves and to plan how we could survive the coming terrible winter. We exchanged valuables with the farmers for food, or we stole potatoes from the fields. There were times when we were chased and one girl was hurt. Once, our group of 11 people was saved by a miracle while we were running under fire.

At the time of our escape from town, my husband and daughter fled in a different direction from us. For 8 days none of us knew where the others were. My husband had reached the place where my sisters were. I then found my baby barefoot and almost naked.

Liza Writes:

WHAT HAPPENED WITH ME AND MY SISTERS BREINDL AND ESTHER

The 3 of us worked very hard in the sawmill, hungry and in rags. Every day, among the logs and piles of lumber, we wept over our bitter fate, and tried to think of some kind of out from this unbearable situation. We decided to escape. Better to be shot in the back than to be led to the pits. We recalled what we had learned about the Jewish fighters in ancient Israel.

I decided to escape to the Betar training camp in Horodok to prepare for my aliya.

One night, with one loaf of bread between the 3 of us, we parted from our dear mother, stole through Pinhas Tinne's yard and headed for the forest. Only the occasional barking of dogs broke the silence. We walked along the narrow rails that led to Horodok and kept going straight. We tore off our yellow patches and felt as though we had removed a stone from our hearts.

We reached a forest guard – an acquaintance – who directed us to the artificial fish ponds ("stavess") where we stayed for 6 weeks, until we were spotted by a cowherd. After the fast of Yom Kippur, we went further to the place where we met our sister Malka's husband Leible with their little daughter Itkele.

The forest guard was a drunk, and though we had given him some gold he did not provide us with food. We had to be satisfied with but a few crumbs. Our situation worsened from day to day, and we were forced to steal potatoes from the fields.

We were all very worried about our sister Malka and decided that Leible and another escapee would go to look for her. After a few days they returned with the good news that Malka was alive and was staying in a family camp under the protection of the partisans. We immediately decided to join her and set out - exhausted, starving, feet wrapped in rags. Snow was falling and we with it – walked and fell, walked and fell – all night long. For a few days we were in the Kunak forests and then were led by Jewish partisans to the family camp under "Kruk" where we met up with Malka. How can I describe the joy of the meeting of sisters, of husband and wife, and especially with the little one?

But our happiness was short-lived. We were informed that babies were not allowed in the fighters' camp. To our good fortune, we were near the partisan unit under "Max" who knew my husband well as they had worked together for the Germans. Here were gathered some tens of the aged, women and children whose living conditions had to be provided. It was decided to set up 2 family camps, each to be protected by a fighting unit. The 2 family camps "housed" several hundreds of people, including a number of children.

Our jobs were to prepare dugouts for living quarters, to do the laundry, to cook and to help the fighters in every possible way. After dangerous missions, the partisans returned to the family camp which saw to their well-being, their cleanliness and their hot food. A true family atmosphere was created, so comforting to the fighters. But in a short time the forest came under German siege, and we had to abandon our "home." The partisans retreated, and we who were left behind were forced to hide in the impassable swamps until the danger passed. More than one died in these impossible conditions.

One day, tragedy struck when the roof of a dugout collapsed and fell on our sister Breindl while she was cooking for the partisans. Her face and hands were badly burned, and in this condition she was forced to walk with us during the siege.

When the danger of the siege and the hunt for us were over, we returned to our camp and re-organized. In spite of the lack of food, our spirits were high and the young among us sang around the campfire.

It is a sorry fact that we suffered from the degrading attitude of the Russian partisans. They looked for every opportunity to get rid of the Jews and murdered 2 of our uncles, Feivel Bindess and Feivel Zafran. We feared for our lives because of these anti-Semitic partisans.

With the beginning of spring we began to plant and sow in the fields and felt blessed by our work.

At the end of 1943, non-Jewish refugees who fled from the Ukrainian Nationalists joined us. At about that time, a large German-Ukrainian force, approximately 5,000 strong, organized a massive hunt for partisans and for people in the family camps. Again we were forced to leave our place and to search for more secure cover. It is difficult to describe the dangers and hardships we

went through. All the while the Ukrainian Nationalists continued their harassment of the partisans, particularly the Jews.

Also joining the partisans were Russian soldiers, escaped prisoners of war. This took place for the most part after the great defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad. This was for us our first spark of hope, and, after our nearly 2-year stay, we began to plan our departure from the forest.

The war was still raging, but parts of Wolyn had already been liberated. Manyevitz was still under German control, but the town of Refalovka, 30 kilometers from Manyevitz, was free, and we went there along with many, many others. But what did we find? What had been a thriving Jewish community now lay in ruins, ruins, houses burned to the ground and pit-graves full of Jews who had been murdered so cruelly.

We returned to our town Manyevitz after a short time and found the same ruins. We went to "visit" our martyrs in the pits.....and if anyone should say that from travails and agonies it is possible to die, don't you believe it!

We began to get settled in our home and tried to make a living by a bit of trading, which was not easy or safe under Soviet rule. But nothing in the world could have kept us in Manyevitz. Our hope was to reach Eretz Yisrael after the war, and, with the approval of the authorities, we soon left the town, leaving everything behind: our dear ones in the pits, our family property, our still-standing home.

During the week of Pessach, 1945, we reached Chelm. There we were given a "welcome" by the Polish anti-Semites who repeatedly declared that it was a pity that Hitler hadn't finished his job of annihilating the Jews.

The war continued, the Red Army overcame the Germans and reached Berlin, bringing the downfall of the Nazis and of Hitler, may his name be blotted out forever.

Malka Writes:

To my great sorrow, my husband fell ill but did not have the strength to recover, and he died in Lublin. Before his death he had begged the Almighty to let him live to reach Eretz Yisrael. But my husband, Leible Singel, was not privileged to realize his dream!

Alone, I and my little daughter remained in Lublin which was saturated with hate of the Jews. The organizing of the Jews to leave Poland for Eretz Yisrael had already begun. The first destinations to be reached were Romania, Hungary, Austria and Italy, from where it was possible to reach our Motherland. But these places were not for me, a pregnant woman with a small child.

By chance I met Antek Zukerman, a man whom my husband had helped organize groups to leave Poland. He promised to help me as best he could. I placed a headstone on my husband's grave and left with the first group bound for Italy. The way was difficult, especially for me in my condition. From there, after some efforts, I was transferred to a Displaced Persons camp in Austria where I could join my sister Esther. From there we were dragged from one place to another,

crossing borders illegally, until we reached Florence. There I gave birth to my son whom I named after his father, Zvi-Arye. And there all 3 sisters met.

With the help of an American Jewish soldier, we got in touch with our relatives in America who helped us reach a haven.

Translated from Yiddish to Hebrew
by Yehuda Merin